DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 273 225 HE 019 641

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TITLE	The Public's View of Higher Education: Implications for Administrators.
INSTITUTION	American Association of Univ. Administrators, Washington, D.C.; ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	86
CONTRACT	400-82-0011
NOTE	5p.
AVAILABLE FROM	American Association of University Administrators, P.O. Box 6221, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487 ($2.00).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
JOURNAL CIT	AAUA-ERIC/Higher Education Administrator's Update, V6 n3 1986.
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Access to Education; College Planning; *Educational Attitudes; Educational Benefits; *Higher Education; Marketing; *Public Opinion; Public Relations; Public Support; *School Community Relationship; School Taxes; *Surveys

ABSTRACT

Citizens' attitudes and opinions toward higher education are discussed, based on the results of several public opinion surveys. Before the mid-1970s little research on public opinions and attitudes toward postsecondary education was conducted in the United States. Since 1975 several states have conducted such surveys, and in 1982 the first national survey of Americans' attitudes toward higher education was conducted. General conclusions based on these state and national surveys include: citizens seem to support higher education and are willing to pay higher taxes to improve educational quality; minorities tend to express even more confidence and support for higher education than do whites; Americans still view aid to education as a priority item in their state and federal budget; most citizens believe that access to college should be available to all qualified students; and citizens view higher education as an important asset to their state and nation. Results of public opinion polls are valuable for higher education planning, including alternative plans for financing further education for students. Opinion polls can also be effective public relations devices and can provide useful information when college administrators develop a marketing strategy for their institution. A summary of nine public opinion polls is included. (SW)

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Volume 6
Number 3

1986

American Association of University Administrators

Administrator's Update

Clearinghouse on Higher Education

The Public's View of Higher Education: Implications for Administrators

Thomas G. Owings

What do Americans really think about higher education in the United States? And what are the implications of what they think for college and university planning?

Before the mid-1970s, very little research on public opinions and attitudes[1] toward postsecondary education was conducted in the United States. Although national polling agencies like Louis Harris and George Gallup conducted widely publicized surveys of public attitudes toward education, the design and intent of those surveys dealt primarily with public secondary and elementary education rather than with postsecondary education. Although the annual Gallup polls conducted for *Phi Delta Kappan* focused on public attitudes and opinions on elementary and secondary education, the findings of these studies over the past 17 years address public confidence in education at all levels.[2]

Since 1975, several states have conducted public opinion surveys about higher education, using a variety of polling techniques.[3] And in 1982, the first national survey of Americans' attitudes toward higher education was conducted by Group Attitudes Corporation. It was designed and conducted by Walter K. Lindenmann and sponsored by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and nine other higher education associations. The survey procedure involved interviews with a stratified sample of 1,188 persons aged 18 and over, representative of the U.S. adult population as a whole. The study found that:

1. A substantial proportion of Americans view aid to education as a priority item in the federal budget.
2. Americans especially favor continued government support of collegiate research in medicine and the physical sciences.
3. If declining enrollments should lead colleges to cut back on certain curricular, a majority of Americans think programs in engineering and the applied sciences, professional fields, the hard sciences, and the social sciences should be cut back only slightly, if at all.
4. A large majority of Americans (72.5 percent) think the overall quality of higher education in the United States is "good" or "excellent."
5. More than one-third (38.8 percent) of all Americans believe the quality of higher education in the United States is improving.
6. An overwhelming majority of Americans (84.0 percent) feel that the opportunity to attend college should be made available to all qualified students.
7. Clear majorities of Americans favor continued federal support for needy students and institutions ("American Attitudes" 1982).

That study was replicated by Lindenmann in 1983, 1984, and 1985. In 1983

[1]Although the terms "opinion research" and "attitude research" are often used interchangeably, the two are not the same. An opinion usually refers only to what a person says, whereas an attitude is a "digested" opinion. An attitude includes not only what the person says but also what the person knows and thinks, how the person feels, and how the person is inclined to act; it involves the full range of impressions a person holds toward an object or issue. Because so many factors are involved, measuring attitudes is usually quite sophisticated and complex, and it uses a variety of techniques. Measuring opinions, on the other hand, usually relies on only the survey. In a measure of opinions in a poll, the survey captures a "snapshot" image of what the public thinks. When enough snapshots are taken, a composite picture of public opinion—and to a limited extent public attitudes—can be drawn (Lindenmann 1983b; Yankelovich 1979).

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[2]During the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, public confidence in education showed a steady decline. By 1982, Gallup noted that the decline in the ratings given by the public to schools in their communities had apparently halted. Only slight changes had been recorded since 1976, and public confidence at all levels of education had begun to stabilize (Gallup 1982). Following a three-year span—1980 through 1982—the Gallup poll trendline seemed to level off, even to climb slightly, only to register an all-time low in 1983 (Elam 1983). This decline, however, seemed to be only temporary, and the downward trend in the public's rating of the public schools ended (Gallup 1984). Forty-two percent of those interviewed gave an "A" or "B" rating to the public schools in their communities, up sharply from 31 percent in 1983 and the highest since 1976 (Gallup 1984, p. 25). Again in 1985, public confidence rose; 43 percent of those interviewed gave the public schools in their communities a grade of "A" or "B" (Gallup 1985, p. 36).

[3]See, for example, Biggs et al. 1975; Brouillette and Rogers 1980; Diener and Owings 1981; Durand, Klemmack, and Roff 1980; Field Research Corporation 1979; Haskins 1975; Livingstone and Hart 1980; Moore, Buffalo, and Johnson 1979; Muenster and Montgomery 1976; Ohio Board of Regents 1978; Owings 1977a, 1977b; Smith 1976.

HE 019 641

and in 1984, findings were quite similar to those of the 1982 study, but in the 1984 survey, the public more strongly emphasized the need for increased federal aid to colleges and universities and more low-interest loans to college students (Lindenmann 1984). Increasing federal aid for higher education was the third highest national priority, immediately following increasing government spending for medical research and increasing government spending for medical care for the aged. For the third consecutive year, Americans felt that the quality of postsecondary education in the United States was improving.

Findings in 1985 were similar to the previous national studies, and nearly three-quarters of those surveyed rated the quality of a college education as either excellent or good (Evangelauf 1985). Since 1983, however public support for federal aid to colleges and college students has declined (Lindenmann 1985, p. 31). Further public support for federal funding of academic research in certain fields has declined (Lindenmann 1985, p. 37). As in the previous surveys, though, the top three national priorities continued to be medical research, medical aid for the elderly, and aid to higher education (Evangelauf 1985).

What the Polls Tell Us

Accurately measuring public opinions and attitudes is not an easy process. Polling is a seeming paradox: On the one hand, polls almost always are accurate in the narrow sense of reporting what cross-sections of Americans say in response to a particular question at a given time. On the other hand, often what people say is not what they really mean. This problem is neither moral, having to do with people's ability to answer truthfully, nor technical, having to do with sampling, the phrasing of questions, or the tabulation of statistics. People almost never lie intentionally in polls, and they virtually never seek to mislead. When faced with the eventuality of an important decision, however, most people do not sort out their convictions until they have spent weeks or months "thinking through" their feelings and attitudes. Hence, a public opinion poll may catch an attitudinal "snapshot" of the public in the act of making up its mind (Yankelovich 1979).

In 1984, an election year, for example, many local and national news commentators were critical of the difference between projected voting based on political opinion polls and actual voting outcomes. They were quick to point out how wrong the polls were. In most cases, however, the polls were not wrong nor sampling or survey procedures flawed. What the polls measured was public opinion at one instant. Between the time the polls were conducted and the time that people voted, opinions changed. How susceptible an opinion was to change often determined actual voting results.

Opinions about higher education generally do not change as often or as suddenly as political opinions, but opinion polls are playing an increasingly important role in decision making in higher education (Matross 1981). Opinion surveys can put into perspective the views of citizens and can assess public opinions and attitudes in terms of long-range planning for the institution. From state and national surveys that have been conducted during the past 10 years, some general conclusions can be formulated.

First, since opinions change over a period of time or vary from location to location, a series of opinion surveys over a period of time or within different states will give snapshots of national attitudes. The more snapshots taken, the better the composite picture that can be drawn. Conclusions from these surveys can be compared with those of national studies.

Second, citizens seem to support higher education, and that support does not appear to be regionalized. Colorado citizens appear to be as supportive of higher education in Colorado as Alabamians are in Alabama: They expect colleges and universities to turn out well-trained scholars and graduates with the marketable job skills needed to find employment and to earn decent wages. Polls taken at different times and in different regions of the country indicate citizens' overall confidence in higher education, their belief in the value of higher education, and their willingness to pay higher taxes to improve the quality of higher education (see the accompanying feature box). The national surveys support these conclusions.

Third, while citizens are aware of problems in higher education, they recognize the importance of colleges and universities. Many citizens not only wish they had more education but also consider it important for their children. Many minorities recognize higher education as one of the few vehicles for upward mobility, if not for themselves, at least for their children. Hence, minorities tend to express even more confidence and support for higher education than do whites. More Americans than ever intend or hope to complete additional schooling in the months and years ahead.

Fourth, although public support for federal aid to colleges and for federal funding of academic research in various fields seems to be declining, Americans still view aid to education as a priority item in their state as well as the federal budget. They expect education at all levels to pay teachers salaries that are comparable to the private sector. In the latest national poll, aid to education ranked third of 14 budget areas, and in most of the various state surveys, education had as high or higher priority.

Fifth, the word "quality" keeps surfacing as an important aspect of postsecondary education. While the overwhelming majority of Americans think the quality of higher education is "good" or "excellent," most citizens indicate a willingness to increase taxes or financial support of colleges and universities if this support will improve quality. Yet citizens expect colleges and universities to control costs and to use their financial allocations wisely.

Sixth, most citizens believe that the opportunity to attend college should be made available to all students who are qualified to attend. This support includes providing federal support for needy students and institutions in the form of grants, loans, and special assistance, although public support of federal aid to college students at the national level is on the decline.

Seventh, citizens view higher education as an important asset to their state as well as to the nation. Americans think colleges and universities should not only address national issues but also play an important part in economic recovery. They must continue specialized research in certain programs, such as medicine and the physical sciences. If cuts must be made, those cuts should be in areas other than those showing the greatest potential for innovation and improvement in science, technology, and health.

Implications for College and University Planners

Every conclusion that has been drawn from these surveys has implications for postsecondary education, but what do all of these conclusions say to the college executive who must deal with various segments of the public each day? What are the implications of these polls for the university administrator? And how can the results of these surveys assist the in-

Summary of Citizens' Attitudes and Opinions Toward Higher Education

State Where Conducted	*Reference*	*Findings*
Alabama	Owings 1977a	Alabama colleges and universities doing a satisfactory, good, or excellent job—82.1% College education important for themselves—76.5% College education important for their children—92.5% Higher education should receive high priority in state funding—64.9% Would be willing to pay more taxes to improve education—35.7% Would oppose using funds earmarked for higher education for another purpose—79.1%
	Owings 1977b	Essentially the same as 1976 survey
	Diener & Owings 1981	Essentially the same as 1976 and 1977 surveys.
Arkansas	Moore, Buffalo & Johnson 1979	College education necessary or very necessary—75% + Would pay higher taxes to support higher education—54% State colleges and universities doing a good or excellent job—50% +
California	Field Research Corp. 1979	Community colleges doing an excellent or good job in using money efficiently—47.6% Quality of instruction excellent or good—67.4%
Colorado	Brouillette & Rogers 1980	Supportive of higher education Higher education should address state problems through research and service Quality of teaching important in faculty evaluations Faculty deserve equitable pay for work Higher education should receive higher state funding
Minnesota	Biggs et al. 1975	On the whole satisfied with the University of Minnesota—70%
Ohio	Ohio Board of Regents 1978	Education doing a good or excellent job—67% + State should spend more money on higher education—55%
South Dakota	Muenster & Montgomery 1976	Public institutions of higher education good to excellent—65.8% Funding for public institutions of higher education not sufficient—42.1%—or about right—37.5%
Tennessee	Haskins 1975	Great or some confidence in higher education—90.2% Want college education for their children—61.2%
	Smith 1976	Confidence in higher education—90% + Would support increase in state funding for education—50% +
Ontario, Canada	Livingstone & Hart 1980	General education should be first priority Expenditures for education should at least keep up with inflation

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Administrator's Update is prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C. Series Editor is Glenn M. Nelson, Associate Professor of Higher Education at the University of Pittsburgh. Copies of Administrator's Update may be ordered for $2.00 each from the American Association of University Administrators, PO Box 6221, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487. Payment must accompany all orders under $15.

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-82-0011. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions of policies of OERI or the Department.

ISSN: 0742-6542

ADMINISTRATOR'S UPDATE
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